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Boston's Big Brother: Paul Epstein



Adam Sennott
Spare Change News

Theo Epstein may have been the architect behind two Red Sox World Series Championships, but his twin brother has gone to bat for countless youths throughout Boston.

Paul Epstein, a social worker at Brookline High School, has dedicated his life to helping disadvantaged kids. Epstein has also been a Big Brother twice, worked at The Home for Little Wanderers, and, along with Theo, created the Foundation To Be Named Later. Epstein is also currently working with students at Brookline High School to build a community center in Brookline.

Epstein's passion for working with kids began while he was a sophomore at Wesleyan University, where he majored in Classic Civilizations and was a member of the school's soccer team. One day after practice, the team captain announced that the underclassmen would be participating in the school's Big Brother Big Sister program. Epstein signed up and his life changed forever.

"The captain of the soccer team was a senior, and the best player and the guy we all looked up to," Epstein said. "He had been the guy who was running the campus Big Brother Big Sister Program and one day in practice he told all the young guys, the underclassmen, 'You're going to sign up to be a big brother.' So I think it was not so much of a request but an order."

Shortly after signing up for the program, Epstein was assigned a little brother. Epstein, a self-described "sports maniac," couldn't have been more different than his little brother, who liked to read and had absolutely no interest in sports. However, they were able to find common ground and form a relationship that has now spanned nearly 20 years.

"We would keep a journal together, I remember that was our big bonding activity in that first year," said Epstein. "Then he was 10-11, going into his teenage years. So I remember after a while our relationship was cemented and his mom and I talked, and I ended up doing a lot of the talking to him about puberty

and even sex. The big topics, the birds and the bees, that type of thing."

Epstein stayed in contact with his little brother as he grew up and went on to earn a graduate degree in library science. While Epstein had a significant impact in the life of his little brother, it was that experience that led him to a career in social work.

"It was truly that moment of getting matched up with a little brother that set me off on the course that I am still on," said Epstein, who signed up to become a big brother again after graduating from Wesleyan, and later worked for a brief time for the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay.

"When I got back to Boston after college I signed up to become a big brother again, and that's my current little brother who I met when he was 10. He's now 22," said Epstein. "I've had two outstanding long term relationships with these little brothers."

Though Epstein realized his passion for social work as a big brother, he soon realized he would need a graduate degree in order to pursue such a career.

However, he also realized that learning was not limited to the classroom and decided to spend the next year working full time at The Home for Little Wanderers before going back to school.

"I ended up working at a residential program in Jamaica Plain called the Knight Children's Center," said Epstein. "I was a staff person there, a childcare counselor, working with kids who were generally between the ages of 6 and 13."

Many of the kids Epstein worked with had been through some rough times early in their lives, but while the work was challenging, Epstein says it better prepared him for his new-found career.

"Generally, the kids had difficult histories, and often times those difficult histories resulted in some pretty challenging behaviors: kids that had difficulty with their emotional equilibrium, and adjustment issues and relationship issues," said Epstein. "A challenging job, but the single best learning experience for a young social worker I could

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ever imagine.

"It's very much a baptism by fire, it really is. And residential work, working with kids in a residential setting, is some of the most intense social work that's out there. So again, so many people get great starts to their career by doing it because you just learn more in one shift then you do in a semester's worth of course work."

Though Epstein had a plethora of significant experiences during his time at the Knight Children's Center, there's a particular one he often shares with people.

"I remember working an evening shift. Evening shift you have to handle bedtimes, putting 12 kids to bed, with other staff, which is often difficult," Epstein said. "I remember a kid had just come onto the unit who was relatively new and he had, I think, fallen asleep and had woken up, perhaps with a nightmare, or just couldn't sleep. I remember him calling out from down the hall, 'somebody, somebody,' he just kept saying 'somebody'."

"It was just so sad to hear a kid who...he didn't have anyone specific to call out for. He certainly didn't have a parent to call out for, he maybe didn't know the staff's names yet, he was just calling 'somebody'. That one call always stuck with me about how sad that was, that this kid who was so young was already at a point in his life where he was just lying up in bed awake yelling for somebody to come help him."

After working at the Knight Children's Center for a year, Epstein decided it was time to go back to school and enrolled in a graduate program at Boston University. However, he remained as a part-time employee with The Home for Little Wanderers.

Though Epstein had devoted himself to his career in social work, he was about to get an unexpected return on his investment. Shortly after earning his graduate degree from Boston University, Epstein applied for a job at another residential program run by The Home for Little Wanderers. Little did he know that as he went in for the interview, he was about to meet his future wife.

"I had just graduated and I called up my friend from The Home who I had worked with and said, 'Hey I wonder if there are any different job opportunities? I have my degree, now I'd like to come back and work,'" said Epstein. "He said 'Why don't you go to the group home up the street, there's a woman there named Saskia, tell her I told you to call and see if there is anything up there.'"

"So I called up Saskia, set up an interview, walked into her office, got hired,

and got a wife all at the same time."

Although The Home for Little Wanderers had introduced Epstein to his eventual wife, he was forced to find a new job while they were dating. However, Epstein would soon find his way back to Brookline High School, where he had received his high school diploma. Ironically, Saskia had also attended Brookline High for a short time while Epstein was there.

"That was when the opportunity [came] to return to Brookline where I had graduated high school," said Epstein, of leaving The Home for Little Wanderers after he and Saskia started dating. "Actually, my wife went to Brookline High too, but we didn't know each other at the time. Exact same age, students at Brookline High, but we didn't know each other. So that was another kind of quirky thing."

Brookline High turned out to be a perfect fit for Epstein, who's now been a social worker there for the past 11 years. Epstein says he particularly likes the high school environment, which allows him to get to know the students he's working with over a longer period of time.

"It's actually an awesome job in the field of social work. One of the things I like about it is that we're seeing the kids in their natural habitat of high school," said Epstein. "It's a little bit different than being a social worker, who might have an office where you see kids for one hour a week for an appointment in a private setting."

"In the high school we're very much a part of the fabric of the school and as such, a part of the fabric of the kids' lives. So you get to form very close and lasting relationships with the students here, and then support their psychological and social development in any way that we're able to."

During his 11 years at Brookline High, Epstein has gone out of his way to help his students in any way that he can. This semester, he and one of his colleagues helped students prepare for a 26.2 mile marathon.

"I got involved with a program this year called Dreamfar. It's a program where they train high school kids to run a marathon," said Epstein. "On Sunday, May 1st, seven [students from Brookline High] ran in the Providence Marathon and finished."

"Four kids ran the full 26.2 mile marathon and three kids ran a half marathon, 13.1 miles. But again, these were kids that were not natural runners to begin with; many of them struggled to run a mile in November. Through all the hard work that they put in, they really transformed themselves and then completed this seemingly impossible task of running a marathon."

Along with training them to run

marathons, Epstein has also spent the last six years helping students plan and develop their own community center in Brookline. Epstein says he came up with the idea for the community center after noticing that some kids were getting off track, and remembering that when he was growing up in Brookline, there wasn't really much for teenagers to do.

"What we ended up doing is something very exciting," said Epstein. "We decided to use the summers, when we were a little less busy and we had some time, to start an internship program. So we hired a couple of dozen teens from Brookline every summer to work as teen center interns. They were charged with nothing less than the planning and the development of the teen center."

"Each summer for the past five years we've had these kids working on the project. It started off as very theoretical, just sort of brainstorming what we would want to have in a teen center if we had one, and where could we put one. And each summer became a little bit less theoretical and more real as we started to do things like raising money and engaging professionals in the project, like architects, and we visited dozens of youth centers all over the state to do our research. We worked with different people in the town to the point where now, we are getting ready to hopefully break ground this summer."

Though Epstein has dedicated himself to the students of Brookline High, he has still found ways to contribute to other organizations that benefit at-risk youth throughout Boston. In 2005, Epstein and his brother Theo started the Foundation To Be Named Later. The organization brings players and personalities from the baseball and music world to raise funds for organizations such as The Home for Little Wanderers, Horizons for Homeless Children and Roxbury Youth Works.

"We called it [The Foundation To Be Named Later] because we were in spring training in 2005, in February, hanging out, tossing around ideas about how we could start this foundation," Epstein said. "And we said we need a good name. We kicked around a bunch of things, we were all throwing ideas out, and we kind of just got frustrated and said screw it, we will just name it later. Then someone, probably Theo, said 'Yeah, that's it, Foundation To Be Named Later.'"

Regardless of the organization's name, many of the Foundation To Be Named Later's beneficiaries are grateful of the support they have received.

"Paul has always been very committed to helping at-risk youth. His work with both The Home for Little Wanderers and the Foundation have allowed us to provide a safe and positive environment for youth in our programs and the community," said Lisa Rowan-Gillis, vice president for development and public relations for The Home for Little Wanderers. "We are grateful for the Foundation to be Named Later's support because it has allowed us to ensure local youth have the opportunity to reach their potential and succeed."

Meryl Sheriden, the chief development officer for Horizons for Homeless Children, added, "The Foundation To Be Named Later supports us in many ways, and financially as state and federal budgets get slashed significantly for social agencies such as Horizons for Homeless Children, the private donations that we receive are even more essential. But maybe as importantly, I would say that Paul Epstein's genuine caring and emotional support as well as financial support to helping us end child homelessness in Massachusetts and throughout the country one child at a time is really important."

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